

Future of St Barnabas Primary School

Officer Responses to Main themes arising from Consultation

The main themes have been summarised below, together with officer comments in italics.

There was very strong general theme in responses about the part St Barnabas has historically played and continues to play in the local community and how that would be affected by closure.

- *The history of St Barnabas is a long and proud one and the conclusion that a proposal to close should be published has been very difficult for both governors and the local authority.*
- *The current nature of education funding combined with a sustained decrease in birth rates across the city has meant the governing body reaching the conclusion that they could no longer continue without major change. Options including federation and academisation were explored but ultimately the uncertainty of any increase in demand for places meant these could not be taken forward and closure was the only remaining option.*

Special Educational Needs/Pupil Support

Many of the responses have referred to the school's experience with and support for pupils with SEND, particularly those with autism. The small classes and high pupil to staff ratio and the caring nature of the school have also been referenced. There were a number of people asking about a possible Specialist Resource Base or even a conversion of the school to a Special School. There was a view that it will cost more to educate the pupils in special schools than in St Barnabas.

- *A Resource Base for pupils with SEND was considered as part of the wider programme to increase the availability of SEND places. The number of additional ASC/ASD places required is limited for primary age pupils and resources available to provide these and other SEND places across all ages is limited. Resources have therefore been targeted. In the case of St Barnabas, the pupil numbers mean lower funding and a reduced number of staff, covering a wider range of duties. Funding for Resource Base cannot be used to support the rest of the school but trying to manage a Resource Base would bring additional pressures on school management. It was not a case of rejecting St Barnabas, it was that the required places could be provided through other schools with more sustainable numbers and more capacity to manage the additional workload.*
- *Rules around changing the nature of a school mean that it is not possible to redesignate a mainstream primary school to become a special school. The process would involve closing and opening a new school. Generally new schools are 'free schools', academies that are established under a process managed by the DfE and subject to a 'competition' process where opportunities are announced in Waves, dependent on the availability of capital resources. There is no indication of when new waves will be announced or that any bid would be successful.*
- *If the proposal is agreed, pupils with an Education and Health Care Plan will have that plan reviewed and a new school named. If they are currently educated in a mainstream school, we would expect the majority, if not all, to be placed in another mainstream school. The individual needs of the pupils and the parental preference of school will be taken into account as it was*

in the original placement. Pupils with additional needs but no EHCP will be placed under the same process as all other pupils.

Finances

Some responses stated that the school should be supported financially until numbers improve.

- *There is very little scope to support individual schools outside of the funding formula which is mainly driven by pupil numbers. The school has used surplus resources built up over a number of years when pupil numbers were higher to minimise the impact on class sizes and staff numbers but this is no longer possible.*

There is no indication that short to medium term demand for places will increase. The number of children entering Reception in Bristol peaked in 2016 and has been reducing each year since then. The main driver behind this is the falling birth rate and although new housing is included in the forecasting model, the demand is projected to continue to fall for the foreseeable future.

Accuracy of Data, Pupil Numbers, Places in Surrounding Schools

There were questions around the basis of the data being used including numbers of pupils from new housing and surrounding schools reducing their intakes.

- *The capacity figure used is either the 'Net Capacity' for maintained schools or the Funding Agreement capacity for academy schools. This is the Department for Education's method of calculating school capacity.*

Pupil numbers in the proposal are from the schools' census, where schools report their numbers on roll to the Department for Education 3 times each year. Current numbers were supplied by the school just before publication of the proposal. These numbers were reviewed again prior to completion of the Equalities Impact Assessment.

The supply of school places which Bristol has to report annually to the DfE is based on School Place Planning Areas. These are made up of groups of schools located in 2 to 3 city wards. St Barnabas is located in the Ashley and Lawrence Hill Planning Area. For the Annual return to the DfE in July 2022, there were 4,795 places in the area. The January 2022 census for these schools recorded 3,287 pupils on roll. This would give a 'surplus' of just over 31%. If schools within ½ mile of St Barnabas are considered then there were 3,328 places and 2,509 pupils on roll, giving a surplus 24.6%. Although 'reasonable walking distances as defined in Education guidance and the council's home to school travel policy as 2 miles for pupils under 8 and 3 miles for pupils aged 8 and over, we do recognise that for most families in an urban environment approximately ½ mile would be a reasonable expectation and so this was used as a comparison to the Place Planning figure. Taking these different calculations into account the figure of 'around 25%' was used.

The number of places in the area was increased in the past as the city experienced a period of sustained growth in birth rates and inward migration. Primary school places were increased in line with forecast demand. The focus of capital funding to provide the additional places was on new academies and Bristol was successful in being given substantial grant funding to set up new primary schools in addition to funding for expansion of existing schools. All schools in the city were considered for expansion. In the case of St Barnabas expansion was not possible

due to issues around the site and buildings that made any major works difficult, the school field cannot be developed and/or did not offer value for money.

Due to falling rolls some schools have moved from 2 to 1 form entry. This is however purely a way of managing numbers and staffing levels within the available budget. No accommodation has been removed from any of the local schools and their overall capacity is unchanged. This has not been possible at St Barnabas which is a single form entry school. The other schools have not removed accommodation and numbers could be increased with sufficient demand. The proposed closure of St Barnabas seeks to make primary provision across the area more sustainable with a better balance of demand and supply of places.

If the Cabinet decide the closure should go ahead parents will be asked to name up to 3 preferences of alternative schools. Where places are available, they will be offered. We can guarantee that all pupils will receive an offer of an alternative school place. We cannot guarantee this will be at a preferred schools but will try our hardest to secure this. If there is scope for schools to take a small additional number, then this will be negotiated with them. We cannot do this prior to any decision being made.

Site/Facilities

Some respondents described how the school offers good green space and playing field, with others not having these facilities. There were also questions about the future use of the site.

- *There are no current plans for the school site and buildings. Ownership is divided between the Council and the Church of England Diocese and future use would need to be agreed. To avoid any assumptions that decisions have been made we have not speculated on what the site could be used for if the closure is agreed. Any school site that becomes vacant would in the first instance be considered for use to help meet educational priorities in the city. These are currently the requirement to increase specialist places for pupils with SEND, new Year 7 and other secondary school year groups. After this other council priorities would be considered.*
- *Use of the school field for development is very restricted due to the location of major water infrastructure below.*

Process

There was some criticism of the process including a suspicion that staff were not being allowed to comment

- *The process for proposing school closure is set out in statutory guidance issued by the DfE. The process for the local authority, as the decision maker is prescribed but does not detail who makes the decision. In the interests of fairness and openness, school closure decisions in Bristol are made at meetings of the Cabinet.*
- *Governors have informed staff of their conditions of service that relate to their conduct and advised on how they get further information on the HR issues. This does not stop them submitting their views on the proposal and they can do this along with any other interested person.*